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ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that outlined the nature and scope of collaborative decision making between principals and teachers in Victoria, Australia, are presented in this paper. When the Cain Labor Government came to power in 1982, it mandated changes in education, including the use of site-based collaborative decision making. The Beginning Principals Study examined the ways in which beginning principals implemented the requirements for collaborative decision making in their schools. The longitudinal study, which began in 1989, involved a sample of eight and a sample of four first-time principals. Methodology included principal and teacher interviews, school visits, and a survey of principals. Findings suggest that the introduction of teachers' working conditions and staffing agreements and collaborative decision-making requirements have contributed to a reduction in industrial disputation, especially at the secondary school level. The collaborative decision-making model appeared to be generally well accepted and applied by beginning principals. However, practices varied by school and principal. Finally, principals and teachers generally lacked skills for effective shared decision making. (LMI)

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Collaborative Decision-making Between Principals and Teachers in Victorian Schools

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> "How much do you push staff and how much do you just let it happen? Staff expect direction; staff expect me to show leadership but also expect me to listen and be responsive. The question of when to do which is really one of the perennial dilemmas of the new collaborative decision-making thing."
>
> "Mostly I find here - and I've got fairly strong ideas about how people should be organised and about the VCE and so on - I have not had to argue strongly about what I think is the way to go .... So, most of the things that I want to do in the school, I get. Through collaboration."

These comments from two Victorian school principals in their first year of office were made in relation to a recent innovation in the operation of primary and secondary schools in Victoria: a requirement for collaborative decision-making between principal and teachers in key aspects of the school. The innovation reflected a Government policy of devolving authority and responsibility for certain matters to the school level, and ensuring the participation of appropriate members of the school community in making decisions concerning those matters.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the nature and scope of the requirements for collaborative decision-making between principals and teachers, to describe the ways in which a group of beginning principals implemented these requirements, and to examine implications of the requirements for teacher education and the preparation of principals.

The Requirement for Collaborative Decision-making

The Cain Labor Government came to power in April 1982 after 27 years in opposition, with a commitment to a number of policy principles, including:

- genuine devolution of authority and responsibility to the school community;
- collaborative decision-making processes;
- a responsive bureaucracy, the main function of which is to service and assist schools;
- effectiveness of educational outcomes; and
- the active redress of disadvantage and discrimination. (Minister of Education, 1983, p.4)

One expression of these policy principles was the publication during 1983 and 1984 of six Ministerial Papers (Minister of Education, 1985): Decision-making in Victorian Education; The School Improvement Plan; The State Board of Education; School Councils; Regional Boards of Education; and Curriculum

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Development and Planning in Victoria. Furthermore, the new Government was committed to reforming industrial relations with teachers, following a long period of teacher unrest over issues which included staffing and conditions, and the teacher unions' campaign for direct negotiations with the Education Department. (Spaull & Hince, 1986)

One outcome of this state of affairs was the negotiation of agreements on conditions and staffing between the Government of Victoria and the Education Department on the one hand, and the three teacher unions, representing teachers from the three divisions of the Education Department, on the other. Education Minister Robert Fordham announced the completion of the first of these agreements with the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association (VSTA) in relation to secondary (high) schools on October 20 1982. Agreements with the Victorian Teachers Union in respect of primary schools followed shortly after, and with the Technical Teachers Union of Victoria in relation to secondary technical schools during 1984. In the early years, new agreements were negotiated annually. However, a two-year agreement was negotiated for 1986-7, and three-year agreements subsequently.

Although there are some differences in content between the three agreements, these are relatively minor, and the same basic structure and content applies for all teachers and principals in all types of schools. A range of matters relating to teachers' conditions of work and the staffing of schools is covered, including physical resources, teachers' hours of work and duties, participation and consultation, class sizes, operation of school libraries, staffing of schools, specialist teachers, and grievance resolution. The agreements have been further developed over the period since their first implementation in 1983, with later agreements tending to be more well defined and specific, and including specified participation of the school union branch and/or its representatives in certain areas of decision-making.

The section of the agreements titled "Participation and Consultation at the School Level" is of particular interest for the present discussion. It requires the establishment in every school of representative committees with structures agreed on between the principal and the union branch. The representative committees in secondary schools are required to have gender balance in accordance with the Action Plan for Women in the Teaching Service (Ministry of Education (Schools Division, 1986)), and in primary schools to reflect the gender balance in the school. The actual structures and processes for collaboration in school level decision-making may vary from school to school. However, one of the representative committees must be a local administrative committee (LAC), charged with assisting the principal in certain organisational and administrative duties.

In secondary schools these duties include determining allotments, staffing allocations, class sizes, the lengths of periods, the allocation of organisational duties and their time allowances including the determination of areas to receive higher duties allowances and school responsibility positions, and the allocations of HDAs, the tagging of positions to be advertised, and other administrative matters in accordance with the Agreement. In primary schools matters to be considered by the LAC include, at least: staff decision-making processes, the allocation of Administrative and Planning Time, class sizes, yard duty, regularity of staff meetings, grade allocations, school administered replacement teacher days, the

allocation of Higher Duties, and ensuring the implementation of the relevant sections of the Action Plan for Women in the Teaching Service. The composition of LACs in secondary schools must be agreed in writing between the principal and the union branch and must include the principal, one principal's nominee, and at least two members of the union branch. The principal or principal's nominee must be a woman. The composition of LACs in primary schools must be agreed between the principal and the union sub-branch, and must include the principal and the union representative.

A Curriculum Committee is also required under the Agreement for secondary schools, to assist the principal "in matters of an educational and curriculum nature, especially in relation to the school council". (Victorian Secondary Teachers Association, 1991,p.9) The principal, who has ultimate administrative and operational responsibility for the school, has the right to reject conclusions of committees under these procedures, but must give reasons for doing so.

Changes to the Role of Principal

Prior to the establishment of agreements on conditions and staffing, the Education Department sent to principals each year an "Organisation of Instruction" document which set out the requirements concerning matters such as class size, teaching loads, etc. The unions would often disagree with the content of the document, and argument and industrial action would frequently result. Such action was most often taken on a school-by-school basis rather than via a statewide approach. While this sometimes resulted in changes being made to conditions and staffing prescriptions, it could be trying and disruptive for the individual principals and schools involved.

The introduction of the conditions and staffing agreements, and in particular the formal requirement for collaborative decision-making between principals and teachers, had considerable implications for the role of teacher and very significant implications for the role of principal. For teachers, it meant becoming familiar with the relevant agreement and its meaning in their school, and coming to terms with the assumption that they were willing and had appropriate knowledge and skills to participate significantly in school decision-making.

For principals, the change was rather more dramatic. While a teacher could avoid actual participation in the major committees established, and thereby keep to the periphery of the collaborative decision-making process, the principal could not. There was now a formal requirement to consult meaningful through locally-agreed structures on matters previously considered to be in the decision-making domain of the principal alone, or of the Education Department. In the first year of implementation of the Agreement, some principals considered they had suffered a loss of power and authority as a result of the Agreement and other organisational and structural changes in the Education Department (Chapman, 1986). However, there was arguably the opportunity to gain a greater commitment to the life of the school, a more professional approach from teachers, and a more stable environment in which to plan and carry out the work of the school.

Under the new Government's policies of devolution and participative decision-making, the principal's role had become much more complex. This was emphasised in a new role statement for principals, circulated to

schools in December 1983 and first published in the Education Gazette in 1984 (Education Department, Victoria, 1984), and in which the dual role of the principal was clearly enunciated:

> The principal carries out the dual role of being both the representative of the Education Department and thereby responsible to the Director General and also being Executive Officer of the School Council, responsible to the School Council for the implementation of Council policies and decisions on all matters within its jurisdiction.
>
> The principal carries ultimate responsibility for the administration and organisation of the school, though this responsibility is to be exercised in consultation with staff. (p.443)

In this statement the role of the principal was spelled out in some detail in relation to the various facets of the job, including collaborative decision-making. Of the 37 separate clauses in the main body of the statement, 13 referred specifically to the provision of relevant information to, or collaboration with, members of the school community. Examples included: "To facilitate effective communication and collaboration between staff, students, parents and the wider community"; "To ensure that staff members have maximum input into all decisions relating to the school program in general and the areas in which they teach in particular." (Education Department, Victoria, 1984, p.444). The requirement for collaborative decision-making was further reinforced through the brief statements from the relevant schools published with the calls for applications for principal positions. In the first round of vacancies after the implementation of the first conditions and staffing agreement for secondary schools and the publishing of the new principals' role statement, 13 of the 24 brief statements from schools with vacant principal positions made specific reference to the expectation that the successful candidate would hold a commitment to the principle of collaborative decision-making (Education Department, Victoria, 1984). This proportion increased in later years.

Implementing the Requirements for Collaborative Decision-making

There is some evidence that the first conditions and staffing agreement was not treated seriously in some schools*. However, this changed over time. In order to investigate the effect on the principalship of the recent major changes to the structure and functioning of the Education Department, Chapman (1986) interviewed seven principals, and teachers from five schools during 1984. This was the second year in which a conditions and staffing agreement was operative, and the first in which the establishment of a LAC was required. She encountered mixed reactions. During 1985 she collected information to develop a descriptive profile of teachers participating in formal decision-making committees of schools (Chapman, 1988). However, this information contained little about the nature and effects of the collaborative decision-making in the schools concerned.

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* Personal communication with members of the Industrial Relations Unit, Ministry of Education.

More detailed information has become available recently as a result of data gathered during the Beginning Principals Study. This information concerns the ways in which beginning principals with up to three years' experience implemented the requirements of collaborative decision-making in their schools and dealt with the issues surrounding the structures and processes involved.

The Beginning Principals Study

The Beginning Principals Study was commenced in 1989 and was designed primarily to develop a picture of the worklife of the first-time principal. Longer term aims of the study are to identify keys to success for the role of principal, and to propose appropriate research based induction, training, and support systems for the beginning principal.

Two samples of eight and four first-time principals were selected from the respective cohorts of principals who first took up a principal positions in Victorian schools at the start of 1989 and 1990. The samples were selected at random, with provisions to ensure that they were broadly representative of the variety of principals and schools in the Victorian state school system. This involved making sure that there was a reasonable geographic and socioeconomic spread of schools, and, given that the majority of principals were males, that there was at least one female amongst the primary and secondary school principals selected. Each principal was assigned to a researcher who interviewed the principal at the school on four occasions during the first year and on three occasions during subsequent years. On two of these site visits the researcher also interviewed a sample of teachers. In addition to the school visits, regular telephone interviews were held with each principal. Interview guides were used for all interviews, and the principals were encouraged to speak freely about the issues affecting them.

To complement the data derived from the interviews, a questionnaire was sent in October of each year to the population of first-time principals who took up their positions in the January of that year. Further details concerning the methods used in the study are provided elsewhere (Beeson & Matthews, 1991).

Beginning Principals, Teachers, and Collaborative Decision-making

Analysis of the data from the two samples relevant to the beginning principal's first six months identified seven major areas of concern for the principal: policies and curriculum; relationships with staff; the image of the school in the wider community; administrative matters; communication; discipline; and time management (Beeson & Matthews, 1992). Significantly, collaborative decision-making was not one of the beginning principals' major areas of concern at this stage. Moreover, when asked late in their first year specifically about industrial relations, all denied it was one of their major concerns. This was not, perhaps, what may have been expected, given the nature of the conditions and staffing agreements, their origins, and the level of union branch involvement in the formal decision-making committees.

On the other hand, nearly 40% of the respondents to the October surveys rated "establishing or improving consultative procedures" a significant problem they had encountered during their first year, thereby placing it

the "top eight" problems as identified through the surveys. However, they did not identify it as one of the major tasks facing them at the start of their principalship.

It must be pointed out that two of the major concern areas identified - policies and curriculum, and relationships with staff - did involve issues which were related in some way to the work of the LAC and/or the curriculum committee. Many of the issues included in the terms of reference of these two committees inevitably had significant effects on school organisation, staffing, and the nature of the curriculum, and thereby on the personal worklives and relationship of individual teachers. Particularly sensitive issues included teaching allotments and workloads, time allocations to subjects, staffing requirements, and declaring teachers "in excess". The principals did sometimes struggle with the decision-making, as one of the comments at the start of this paper illustrates. Another principal commented, "I find it difficult to know how much to suggest beforehand - how much of a tentative plan I should express. I don't know whether to approach the Administrative Committee completely openly or with a number of suggestions or even a preferred option".

However, in terms of the decisions themselves, it was not always clear if the struggle was made any less or more difficult by the procedures required. Especially in their early months, the principals found many of the decisions that had to be made difficult, and their quantity and constancy burdensome. Despite this, and the collaboration requirements, the principals appeared not to be discouraged from making decisions of a supervisory kind or issuing instructions as they saw fit. One principal "used a mixture of the principal's right to tell the teacher what his responsibilities are, and just encourage him". Another noted that some teachers "just need to be instructed about what is expected and reasonable". A third reported "I have had to come the heavy with a few teachers and tell a few off for not getting to their classes on time or dismissing classes early. I have spoken about these matters once in general and have also spoken to two teachers privately".

Some principals, apparently those who were most committed to collaborative decision-making and who used it effectively, expressed concern on occasions over the level of experience or other qualities of teachers elected to, or willing to be involved in, the main committees. One commented that "there have recently been elections for the new LAC and I'm rather disappointed in it. The people on it are less able to handle the issues", and an other that "the LAC is fine, but I often wish that they had more experience. There is only one experienced teacher on it. I take quite a lot of time on explaining how the school and the Agreement works".

There was some evidence that, when teachers were satisfied they were being consulted and the collaborative procedures adhered to, and when things were going along smoothly, they were less anxious to be involved in the process:

> Because they think they have picked me - the VSTA Branch - therefore they are much less aggressive and much more conciliatory. [The VSTA Branch supported the appointment of the Principal, on the basis that he was a union principal.] I am only just finding out all about this that went on last year [during his selection]. Because of this there is much less aggro, fewer hassles, etc. All elections and appointments used to be hotly contested last year but now there is a

> fundamental lack of interest. I take this as a positive sign - people are not ringing each other up and lobbying, etc. - it has become much less political. But there is still a healthy number of people interested in getting on the School Council.

On the other hand, when the situation was difficult, the LAC in particular could be a powerful critic of the principal. In one school, the LAC accused the principal of lacking empathy, being rude to staff, and at one stage presented her with a list of "What Lesley has done" since the beginning of the year, and of which they disapproved.

The weight of evidence from the Beginning Principals Study indicates that teachers want a principal to be decisive, but within a collaborative model. As one commented in relation to her new principal who was committed to the participative procedures, "The leadership is pleasing - the principal is decisive, rather than being 'airy-fairy'. The collaborative process is not being used as a cover".

Use of the Committee Structure

Decision-making in relation to the school Local Administrative Committee (LAC) and Curriculum Committee was more of an issue in the secondary schools than the primary schools in the samples. The new principals used the committees in somewhat different ways. Two of the six secondary school principals adopted a strong decision-making stance themselves. Both these principals were quite comfortable with the two committees and their operation. (In fact, both had declared themselves as 'a union principal', or a 'union man'.) However, they did not consider the advice of either committee as the last word on any matter, and reserved the right, as principal, to make a decision contrary to the advice of a committee. In general, such action did not seem to be necessary, in the eyes of the principals concerned.

Two others saw their pro-active decision-making role being played as members of the committees. Their view was, basically, that they would prefer to work through the structure, and that they ought to be able to 'win the day' on arguments in the committees, rather than outside them. They also considered this approach to be in the spirit of the Agreement and the Ministry's* expectations. One of these two also considered herself a strong union person.

Other principals tended to regard the committees more as the decision makers. In their conversations they used expressions such as "the LAC made a decision", and referred to having to "put it to the LAC". While such a view did not necessarily represent an abrogation of decision-making responsibility to a committee (especially the LAC), it does indicate an important difference in approach from the first two principals referred to above, although this difference may be a subtle one in practice. In fact, at least one of these two principals regarded herself as a strong decision maker, and there was some comment from teachers that she had made decisions with insufficient consultation.

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* formerly Education Department.

Two examples will illustrate this difference. The first involved an important curriculum planning decision in the senior part of the school. The second involved declaring a teacher 'in excess' - always a difficult matter for all involved.

Example 1. In the second half of the year, the Curriculum Committee was planning the curriculum for the following year. There was lengthy consideration of the proposition that mathematics should be made compulsory for all student in Year 11. The Committee decided against the proposition. Bill decided not to accept this advice. It was a matter he felt strongly about, and believed parents wanted mathematics to be compulsory.

He commented:

> I have gone along with every decision so far, but I believe that staff have to see that the principal has the right to make decisions under the current industrial agreement. Several of the more knowledgeable staff are aware of this but many teachers don't understand the Agreement. The Curriculum Co-ordinator and the Year 10 Co-ordinator have come to see me and they both believe that I'm wrong. They have been pretty supportive [of me] up to now and I tend to trust their professional judgement. They still feel very strongly about it and I don't like to see them bleeding like that.

Bill also noted that the school had very well established democratic procedures for making decisions relating to curriculum matters. He believed that what upset the teachers even more, was that after engaging in a lengthy consultative process, he made a decision not to accept the advice tendered to him.

In the event, Bill left the door open a little to be convinced by demonstrated student and parent preference that his decision was wrong. Evidence that was gathered tended to support the stand he took. Interviews with teachers, including members of the Curriculum Committee, showed that the teachers accepted the principal's right to make such a decision. A typical comment (by a member of the Curriculum Committee) was: "I disagree with the decision, but I accept it, especially as there were only one or two dissenting students. The principal has the right to make that sort of decision". No lasting animosity towards the principal over this matter was evident.

Example 2. Scotty was faced with a difficult situation in the first six weeks of the school year.

> On the second day of school we found that our numbers were down and so we had to declare a teacher in excess. This was a very difficult decision. The LAC made a decision but the Faculty [Department] Co-ordinators put pressure on me. I had to inform the teacher which made her very distraught and emotional and she took the position that she wished to contest the decision. She involved the union and things became very tense and the staff generally became very tense. It was a very unpleasant situation.
>
> I then hit on a tactic to handle the matter. I said to her 'I want you to be able to stay at this school and we will do everything in our power to make this happen. I encourage you to do the same'. By

> going this way I was attempting to defuse the situation. After all it's not a war we are engaged in. This was a critical issue and point for the teacher and for me, as we were able to resolve the war and break down the walls that were building up around the various participants - the union, the teacher and me. I have maintained this approach.

In contrast, Fred reported, in his second year of principalship, that in one case "... the LAC wouldn't do it" (i.e., recommend which teachers should be declared in excess). "They just left the decision to me". He was quite comfortable with this situation.

Discussion and Implications for Teacher Education

This paper has provided only a brief insight into the requirements for collaborative decision-making in Victorian schools, and the way beginning principals and their teachers respond to them. While the emphasis here has been mainly on the role of the principal, the roles and responses of teachers are clearly implied.

Three tentative generalisations are suggested. Firstly, the evidence suggests that the introduction of the conditions and staffing agreements, and the collaborative decision-making requirements encompassed, have lead to a reduction in industrial disputation, especially in respect of secondary schools. This seems to apply at the broad level across the state,* and at the individual school level, where the procedures encourage issues to be confronted and resolved as they arise.

Secondly, the collaborative decision-making model seemed generally to be well accepted and applied by the beginning principals in the sample. However, there was considerable variation from school to school and principal to principal. Not only was there variety in the ways the principals sought to apply the model, or use it to suit their ends, there was also variety in their attitudes towards it. Some adopted more proactive and positive approaches than others. There is some evidence from the Beginning Principals Study that, after two or three years in their positions, as they became more experienced, the principals were a little more impatient with the time taken in collaboration compared with what would be the case if the principal were able to make unilateral decisions. The collaborative model raises problems and issues of its own, not the least of which are the need for principals and teachers to become familiar with the quite complex agreements, and the time commitment required from both parties.

Thirdly, there are clear implications for teacher education and for the preparation of principals. Particular knowledge and skills are required in relation to operation of committees, representation of interests, negotiation, and organisation and administration, for the collaborative decision-making procedures to work with optimum effectiveness. Some principals interviewed expressed concern at their own lack of preparation, and of the inexperience and lack of knowledge of many of teachers. This raises the question as to the adequacy of teacher professional development

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* Personal communication with members of the Industrial Relations Unit, Ministry of Education.

programs and activities relevant to this area. With constant changes and developments in teaching requirements and school organisation it is difficult for teachers to arrange to have their needs met, and for those who may have expertise to contribute, such as higher education institutions, to keep up to date.

This situation could be assisted by a closer relationship between the teaching profession, teacher employing authorities such as the ministries or departments of education, and education faculties of universities.

Notes: 1. The Beginning Principals Study is a longitudinal study carried out by Geoff Beeson, Robin Matthews, Jenny Baker, and Margaret Mallia of Deakin University.

2. The assistance of Ingrid Leonard in the collation of data for this paper is acknowledged.

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